

“Balkanizing” the War on Terror

Written by Sidita Kushi

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/04/balkanizing-the-war-on-terror/>

SIDITA KUSHI, MAR 4 2015

The Balkan Peninsula has long been relegated to the periphery of Western security concerns. This demotion appears fitting in the wake of deadly jihadist attacks across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia; the brutal progression of ISIS; and the enduring crisis in Ukraine. But while the epicenter of international security threats lies elsewhere, the Western Balkans are facing serious concerns about the diffusion of extremist ideologies across the Mediterranean. The recent terrorist attacks in France were a materialization of what European leaders have long feared – radical Islamic militarism in the West. Thus, despite the ongoing crises, emerging terrorist threats in the Balkans should not be taken lightly – given the region’s central location and its history of violent conflict, economic deprivation, and volatile institutions.

This article argues for increased international attention to the Western Balkans so as to curb emerging security threats linked to global terrorism. First, I examine the changing security contexts within Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia – comparing their post-1990s security concerns to contemporary trends of increasing ideological extremism. I determine that in the past, terrorist threats in the region emanated from the influx of foreign radical groups within national borders, but today, the main concern is the domestic transformation of long-moderate Balkan natives into radical militants.

Next, the article delves into the unique dangers of ideological extremism with the Western Balkans. The 1990s Balkan wars, largely driven by hostile ethnicities and religious identities, produced an era of mass violence and costly Western military interventions. To this day, European and American resources remain tied to state building and security measures in the region. Growing ideological extremism and religious fundamentalism may aggressively revive civil conflicts between antagonistic Balkan populations, which rely on a long tradition of religious moderates to maintain a fragile peace. Even worse, destabilized Balkan societies would serve to supply more militant recruits into the heart of Europe and the Middle East and foment an atmosphere conducive to global terrorist networks. Thus, while cautioning against blanket vilification and rash politicization of such issues, I conclude with a call for targeted Western investment into the Balkans.

Assessing the Situation – What’s Changed?

Although characterized by large Muslim populations, the Western Balkans have remained overwhelmingly secular over the decades, with Albania serving as a contemporary beacon of religious tolerance. So, it is understandable that few policymakers and academics have even bothered assessing serious terrorist risks. But global trends of ideological extremism, expanding foreign influences, and resentments over Western policies may be altering social dynamics in the region. These days, the main worry in the Balkans is the radicalization of natives – no longer the infiltration of foreign fighters into Balkan civil wars. Radicalized Balkan natives are an especially worrisome prospect for Europe, which already fears violence at the hands of returning jihadists from the Middle East.

Before the conflict in Syria, fewer than a dozen natives from the Western Balkans had joined in foreign fighter missions. In contrast, by June 2014, 218-654 Balkan natives were fighting alongside Islamic militants in Syria, according to a West Point report. These fighters come from Bosnia (50-330 fighters), Kosovo (80-150), Albania (50-90), Macedonia (6-12), and Serbia (30-70). Just in the last month, five citizens of Kosovo were indicted on terrorism charges for fighting in Syria. Although conservative Islam is not popular among pro-Western Balkan

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communities, radical groups have been able to gain a significant online and real-life foothold over the years – perhaps best illustrated by the increase in niqab-covered women in Balkan cities, once a rare sight. A particularly disturbing recent phenomena, however, is the existence of online videos and photographs in which Balkan citizens decapitate human beings in the name of an ideology that was once foreign to their lands. Radicalism is further encouraged by financial support from Arab countries and the persistent media coverage of Islamists’ missions in Syria.

The affected Balkan governments are fighting back. They continue to work with the US and the EU to arrest terrorist suspects, shut down non-governmental organizations linked with terrorist activity, and freeze financial assets of suspected terrorists. In this past year, Bosnia passed a law that sentences convicted Islamists and recruiters to up to 10 years in prison. Kosovo, which arrested fifty-five Islamists this past year, and Serbia, which charged five militants, are also in the process of bolstering their anti-terrorism laws. But much more can and should be done in this changing context, especially by international actors. Thus, it is important to analyze emerging terrorist threats within the affected Western Balkan nations of Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania, particularly with respect to how today’s concerns differ from the past and how the West should react.

In Bosnia

Back in the late 1990s, the West worried about the threat of lingering foreign fighters, who had entered the chaotic region during the three-sided Bosnian war. Hundreds of Arab and Middle Eastern fighters traveled to Bosnia to fight on behalf of the Muslim Bosnians against Croats and Serbs. Although many of these mujaheddin, or holy warriors, were driven out after the war, about 700 to 1,000 of them remained and received citizenship. These remaining immigrants spurred Western concerns about Islamic radicals looking to create cells of “white al Qaeda,” which could better evade European security measures. Bosnia also received large monetary investments from Islamic organizations – some of them suspected fronts for al Qaeda. In a 2008 report, Bosnian investigative journalist Esad Hecimovic claimed that Saudi Arabia spent two billion riyals, about \$500 million, to build mosques in Bosnia from 1992-2001 alone. But most importantly, experts warned that the region might serve as a transit point for terrorist activity across Europe and the Middle East – an especially dangerous scenario given the region’s thriving black markets and lax border control. This is why the CIA and other foreign agencies set up a joint headquarters to closely monitor terrorism suspects in Bosnia shortly after September 11.

In October 2005, Bosnian police captured an Islamic terrorist cell that was plotting to bomb the British Embassy in Sarajevo, and in the same year, police in Croatia arrested five Bosnians involved in a plot to bomb the papal funeral. By 2006, the State Department Country Reports on Terrorism warned that the decentralization of the Bosnian state – a product of the Dayton Peace Accords – “made it vulnerable to exploitation as a terrorist safe haven or as a potential staging ground for terrorist operations in Europe.” More and more Balkan clerics around that time also began to train in the Middle East, becoming immersed in more radical forms of Islam, such as Wahhabism – a school of thought once foreign to Balkan-style moderate Islam.

Today, the terrorist concerns in Bosnia are of a slightly different scope – although worries about Bosnia as a transit point for foreign militarists still loom. New developments relate to terrorist threats boiling inside national borders. On September 2014, the State Investigation and Protection Agency in Damascus detained sixteen people, accused of financing and recruiting Bosnians to fight in Syria and Iraq. This November, Bosnia also detained eleven people suspected of terrorist acts. Earlier in the year, Bosnian authorities said that up to 1,000 people from the country were thought to be fighting with ISIS. These are not small threats, considering the delicate social balance that must be maintained in the Balkans and the frail institutions responsible for upholding this balance. Perhaps most significantly, these contemporary patterns signal worrisome changes in the nation’s cultural landscape. One can sense a gradual transformation from a unique, Balkan form of Islam, which has allowed the inhabitants of the peninsula a shot at coexistence, to an imported, foreign radicalism. The most telling illustration of this transformation may be the repeated stabbings suffered by a moderate Bosnian imam for speaking out against Bosnian militants fighting in Syria or Iraq.

In Kosovo

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Kosovo stands as one of the most pro-American nations in the world, largely due to NATO's efforts to liberate Kosovar Albanians from oppressive Serbian rule in 1999. As Hashim Thaci, Kosovo's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, noted, “Driving from Pristina airport to my office in the centre of the capital, you must pass through Bill Clinton Boulevard, George Bush Avenue and Bob Dole Street.” Continuing its efforts to please its US heroes, the Kosovo government passed a bill this past year prohibiting citizens from fighting in foreign wars, and it concurrently arrested 40 suspected militants and 9 imams, who, allegedly, sponsor extremist activity. But this will not be enough – in fact, such rash police action may even fuel resentment among Kosovo's Muslim communities. Kosovo's citizenry is overwhelmingly secular and EU-aspiring, but the longer the Kosovar economy flounders (with the unemployment rate standing at over 40%), and the longer its government institutions ooze of corruption, the more youth Kosovo may lose to radical ideology.

In the past, Serbian and Russian intelligence sources have asserted the existence of an al Qaeda presence in Muslim-majority Kosovo, but few Western sources have confirmed such operations. Thus, caution was recommended in assessing Russian and Serbian claims, noting that both countries have an interest in spreading negative publicity for Kosovar Albanians. While radical Islamic organizations attempted to recruit among the Kosovar population during the 1990s and beyond, they had very limited success. Nonetheless, past concerns also related to the new nation's black markets, in which terrorists could obtain weapons and explosives for use in attacks in Western Europe.

But nowadays, extremist concerns in Kosovo, as in Bosnia, stem from internal dynamics. Over the years, the streets of Kosovo have reflected the growing religious fervor, with more covered women and devout, bearded men. It's also becoming common to pay people, especially poor parents, in the beginning phases of regular mosque visits and ideological transformation. As one commentator put it, “Kosovo is a country of stark contrast,” – it is at the same time the US's most ardent supporter and Europe's supposed source of radical Islamists. According to various estimates, there are currently between 150 and 200 Kosovars in Syria. On a per capita basis, Kosovo has the most militants there of any European nation, and due to its unstable institutions, economic woes, and unfavourable ethnic relations, it is deemed to be one of the more vulnerable Balkan nations for extremist takeover.

In Serbia

Although Serbia lacks a large Muslim population in comparison to its neighbors, it too is an important player in altering Balkan dynamics. Muslims make up only about 3% of Serbia's population, with most concentrated in the Sandzak region of southwestern Serbia. Along with these Slavic Muslims, ethnic Albanian Muslims are concentrated in the Presheva valley region of southeastern Serbia, bordering on Kosovo. The dangers in Serbia lie in the division of both ethnicities and religious affiliations, which if exacerbated, can lead to extremism from any of the many politicized identities. Serbian citizens have not been immune to global calls for ISIS recruits. “There are more than 100 such people in Serbia, and this number is not insignificant bearing in mind the possible consequences of their return after being trained by foreign religious fanatics,” Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dacic recently stated. In addition, Serbia faces unique concerns about its Orthodox Christian citizens joining the fight in Ukraine, largely on the side of the pro-Russian rebels. Such societal fragmentations and diverse militant activity must serve as warnings for the foundation of future conflict.

In Albania

Albania has a long history of harmony between its three major religious groups, Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. Similar to the rest of the Balkan nations, Albania has cooperated closely with the US in the fight against terror. Since December 2004, the Albanian government has frozen the assets of main organizations (Taibah, International Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, Al Haremein, and Global Relief Foundation) and many individuals identified by the United Nations as suspected of supporting extremist groups. Although Albania is not the most worrisome of the Balkans cases, current security challenges permeate national borders. Recently, the US sent a counter-terrorism delegation to Albania – responding to the growing number of Balkan Muslims joining al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria. This policy must be followed with more attention and investment if the US truly wishes to stem the emergence of Balkan terrorism.

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Dangers of Religious Extremism in the Balkans

Terrorism on a global scale increased 61% during the 2012-2013 period. This dynamic holds special repercussions across the Balkans – the part of the world that singlehandedly characterized the 1990s as the decade of ethnic conflict, bloody civil wars, and unpopular Western humanitarian interventions.

Religious extremism has grown since the fall of Yugoslavia and the collapse of Albania’s isolationist communist regime. Both the opening of these societies to international actors and the brutal legacy of the Balkan wars invited the attention of radical activists, theologians, and militants – eager to spread their ideologies onto new soil. “The ideological chasm that opened with the break-up of Yugoslavia has been filled by radical religious programmes and nationalists,” Serbian orientalist Darko Tanaskovic confirmed. Feeding off widespread corruption and economic desperation, radical imams, who complete their religious studies in Arab nations and receive funding from abroad, recruit from the poorest of the population, especially vulnerable youth. As a stark illustration, the vast majority of the leaders of the Balkan militant Islamic movement, such as Nedžad Balkan, Bilal Bosnić and Kosovo clerics Zekerija Qazimi and Lulzima Qabashi, received their education in the Middle East, where they adapted radical, nonnative ideologies and formed connections with other members of the global jihad movement.

Growing religious extremism cannot amount to anything other than violent conflict in a region known for its recent, raw hostilities. More Islamist extremism in the Balkans translates to more regional instability as three major religious groups (Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians) and several ethnic groups (Albanian, Serb, Croatian, Bosnian) hesitantly progress toward reconciliation both across nations and within. This process of compromise relies on a long-standing tradition of religious moderates. With the fading of such societal dynamics, ethnic and religious groups in the region stand little chance at coexistence. In Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, relations between Muslims and Christian Orthodox citizens remain precarious, as depicted by frequent protests and vandalism of places of worship by opposing groups. Thus, if Muslims in the region grow more extreme and less tolerant of their already belligerent Christian counterparts, it may set off a cycle of magnified intolerance across the crowded, heterogeneous peninsula – perhaps making another explosion of the Balkan powder-keg more likely into the future.

Stemming Militant Radicalism in the Bud

The world cannot handle another Balkan crisis in the near future, especially not one that exacerbates the menace that is global terrorism. Since September 11, the US has lessened its commitments to the region, in part due to new priorities in the Middle East. NATO-led peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and Kosovo have been reduced over the decades, with SFOR’s Bosnia mission concluding in 2004. As it stands, the EU holds the biggest role in Balkan security policy, given that it has the most to lose from Balkan instability. Yet this might not be an optimal situation.

In the case of both Albania and Kosovo, the US must step in once more. The populations of these nations continue to venerate the US, but they often regard the EU with suspicion – recalling post-Ottoman legacies, border disputes, and inactivity during the Kosovo Crisis. The US should increase its influence in the Albanian-speaking region, through traditional diplomacy, economic development programs, such as the collaboration between the Albanian government and Harvard University, and cultural diffusion efforts. US foreign aid, tied to efforts to enforce the rule of law and promote lasting economic productivity, would also go a long way in ensuring stability in the long-run. In this way, the US would keep these Balkan nations close to the West, close venues for more nefarious foreign influences, and soften some of the resentments arising from EU involvement over the years. The US has political credibility, particularly among ethnic Albanians and some Bosnians, which the EU may lack – why not use it? The transatlantic partners must maximize their respective credibility within the Balkans.

Second, the US alongside the EU must encourage a stronger civil society in the Balkans. This civil society must be empowered to hold government institutions accountable, demand anti-corruption efforts, and direct resentments toward the democratic process, not radical ideology. Political institutions matter, but they will never be the cure-all for Balkan dilemmas.

Third, the West could invest, both monetarily and knowledge-wise, in the proposed Balkan anti-terrorism center. This

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center would serve to coordinate security policies across the Western Balkans and share intelligence on terrorist groups, including their networks, capacities, and recruitment locations. The center would also prompt greater cooperation with US and EU intelligence services, and may be used for training.

Even though the security spotlight rests on the Middle East, the West must recall that the fight against terrorism not only requires the destruction of existing terrorist organizations; it demands the eradication of conditions conducive to future terrorism. The West must be vigilant in its search of vulnerable populations, even within its own sphere of influence. Just recently, this very lack of inattention to the Western Balkans has fueled some of the most pressing of EU and US security concerns. In the EU, the Paris state prosecutors' office now possesses evidence that the firearms used by Charlie Hebdo attackers likely came from the Balkans. Radicalized Balkan natives are even promoting terrorist activity within US soil, as seen in the recent indictment of six Bosnian immigrants in Missouri for ties to ISIS and the global jihad movement. The US and the EU have strong security interests in the Western Balkans these days, and they ought to respond to them if they wish to minimize the damage of potential lone wolf attacks across Europe, the financing of militant Islam across the world, and the growth of criminal network within the weakened security and economic infrastructures of Balkan nations.

The Perils of “Balkanizing”

Finally, serving as a note against sensationalist policymaking, we must be careful not to exaggerate threats stemming from the Balkans since largely secular, Western-aspiring actors still dominate the region. Often in the Balkans, hostile ethnic groups use charges of terrorism as smear campaigns. For instance, Serbian politicians make allegations of al Qaeda training camps in Bosnia and Kosovo in an effort to discredit the two nations. In opposition, Bosnian and Albanian leaders accuse Serbs of state-sponsored terrorism in sheltering indicted war criminals. If the West falls prey to such politicization, it will soon lose all credibility among the elites and citizens of the Western Balkans. Indeed, Western intervention must be delicate and highly specialized to tangible concerns; otherwise, any degree of intervention may cater to anti-Western views and may isolate and antagonize the region's primarily peaceful Muslim communities. In this case, “balkanizing” the war on terror not only means focusing on a number of small, highly fragmented nations, it means interacting with strong forces of historical narrative, all-permeating ethnic and religious resentments, and constant struggles to separate reality from popular politics and vested interests.

Hence, while the EU and the US must reassess risks and potential investments in the Western Balkans in light of worrisome trends in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia, they must also learn to separate the politics and the mass hysteria from the true security threats. Yes, religious extremism and radical militants are a growing concern in the Balkans, but there is no need to panic – there is just the need to pay attention and offer help.

About the author:

Sidita Kushi is a Doctoral Candidate in Political Science at Northeastern University. Her research focuses on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, particularly as related to issues of security and political economy. She recently published a piece in New Eastern Europe on security concerns over Greater Albania and an article in TransConflict on the origins of Albanian-Serbian relations. Sidita has also previously published on transatlantic relations and the functionalities of NATO within the Balkans. Follow her on @SiditaKushi.